Safundi* round table: Mark Sanders, *Learning Zulu: A Secret History of Language in South Africa

Learning Zulu and bearing witness

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It feels appropriate to make a confession at the outset of this round table response: I write it here in London while eying my own copy of Sibusiso Nyembezi's *Learn Zulu*, alongside *Complete Zulu* (books and CDs). In other words, I find myself implicated in Mark Sanders' many scenes of learning and failing to learn Zulu, just as Sanders himself is implicated in his engagements with the Zulu language and literary texts he encounters in this revealing book. Among many other questions it asks, are: what does it mean to try to learn "a language" at a remove from its everyday use by speakers, abstracted from the lifeworlds of which it is part? And what is it, then, that one is learning?

Sanders, setting about "*learning Zulu again"*, confronts not only past versions of himself – as a child in the 1970s, a "Zulu Boy" in the chorus-line of a school production of *Ipi Tombi*; as an undergraduate student in the 1990s, "learning Xhosa" in the language laboratory at UCT – but also his relationship to an 150-year history of white learners of Zulu in South Africa: British missionaries, colonial officials, the "white Zulu" Johnny Clegg, the Jarvis boy in Alan Paton's *Cry, The Beloved Country*, Judge van der Merwe, who presided over Jacob Zuma's rape trial. Sanders' learning Zulu is both a facing of, and an effort to move past, the raced histories of language in South Africa, and of his position as both "victim" and "beneficiary" of "the sins of the fathers", "who wrought a system in which learning Zulu was made difficult for me (let that be a metonym for much else)".[1] Thus Sanders shuttles between subtle and penetrating critique of regimes, pedagogies, and representations of language; the inescapably dialogic, interpersonal, and *personal* experiences of language learning; and, underpinning both, the often agonized historical and psychic dramas they play out of guilt, identification, loss, and longing. In building its conception of language politics out of the unflinchingly personal, it reminds me of Jacques

[1] Sanders, p. 7.

Derrida's *Monolingualism of the Other*, as well as much more recently, Rey Chow's *Not Like A Native Speaker*. Yet while Derrida and Chow focus on the figure of the *speaker* in colonial and postcolonial languaging, Sanders' concern is decidedly with the *learner*, with language pedagogies and scenes of tutelage, and this emphasis gives the book its distinctive shape. Sanders, whose own "learning Zulu" initiates and marks the centre of this book, wants to be a good student of "the language", which he also feels as a kind of confession, and a plea to be forgiven: *ngicela uxolo*, I beg forgiveness.

> In uttering the plea *ngicela uxolo*, one takes up the position of speaking subject. One makes the language one's own as one speaks, but one also declares oneself guilty – of having committed a wrong, of having failed to do what was expected, of having, by some act or omission, broken the peace.[2]

As well as a confession, learning Zulu may also be an act of reparation: Melanie Klein's *Wiedergutmachung*, a "making good again", directed towards the object one has wronged.[3] *Learning Zulu* is full of many language learners and scenes of language learning, but it is above all language autobiography, with Sanders as the white learner who longs to be forgiven, and must make reparation.

Learning Zulu dwells on the psychodynamics of language learning: to learn a language as an adult, Sanders tells us, brings an intensified repetition of the patterns of infancy, the time when one was learning one's first language. It is also, by extension, about the psychodynamics of reading, learning, and teaching. Reading D. B. Z. Ntuli's play *Ngicela uxolo* with his teacher Eve Mothibe at Wits, he is overwhelmed by its narrative of paternal abandonment and failed reunion, thrown into reflection on his own paternity, out of which he shapes, in Zulu, a narrative which is able to refocus for the first time not on his estranged biological father, but on his late adoptive father. In a sense, in learning Zulu, Sanders seeks to enact such a switch, evading the "sins of the fathers" whose apartheid system prevented him from learning the language, through a series of teachers – loving, attentive, "good" Zulu-speaking surrogate mothers and fathers – whose "stamp of approval: a gold star, a

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[2] Mark Sanders, *Learning Zulu: A Secret History of Language in South Africa* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016), p. 2.
[3] Sanders, p. 3.

Good News Note to take home, a heartfelt 'Well done'" he seeks.[4] Yet while this object of desire, "Zulu", stands for welcome, acceptance, and reparation through being its good and diligent student, it also shows itself increasingly, as Sanders' learning progresses, as potentially violently exclusionary. This is revealed, most brutally, when in 2008 foreigners become subject to a renewed spate of xenophobic attacks, turning on the shibboleths of Zulu: mastery of correct Zulu pronunciation (something which has insistently concerned, and eluded, Sanders himself as a learner) and knowledge of certain archaisms demanded as "proof" of rightful belonging. In 2008 in South Africa, the relationship between the "epistemic" violence of language purism, and other kinds of violence, becomes once again inescapable.[5] Through the psychodynamics of Sanders' relationship to his object of desire, "Zulu", then, run opposing visions of language. He longs to learn a Zulu which is *correct*, to speak *well*, a proper Zulu language for a making-good-again. Placing himself in the lineage of J. W. Colenso, there is a purist streak to him, a wish to be a good student of good Zulu, and thus a sustained and somewhat unexamined faith in the ideology of languages as stable objects of knowledge: the fantasy language-as-system which can be learned "100%".[6] Yet at the same time, he also wants to think of Zulu as hospitable, open, and therefore pliable: how, after all, in such a transformative vision of language learning, could it be only the learner and not the language that is open to being altered by the experience? It is this openness which he detects even in Jacob Zuma's rape trial testimony, with all of its invocations of an aggressively patriarchal, ethnolinguistic "Zuluness": tracing, through Zuma's words, the shadow of Zulu as "something that is *learned* and which therefore has been taught, and could therefore also have been *taught differently*".[7] This is Zulu as "just another language", or even: just *language*.

Learning Zulu treats the experience of learning a language as a special case: drawing a line from its formative status in infancy to its capacity in adulthood to "make-good-again".

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[4] Sanders, p. 96.
[5] Sinfree Makoni and Alastair Pennycook, 'Disinventing and Reconstituting Languages', in Sinfree Makoni and Alastair Pennycook, *Disinventing and Reconstituting Languages* (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 2007), pp. 3, 16.
[6] Sinfree Makoni, 'From Misinvention to Disinvention of Language: Multilingualism and the South African Constitution', in Sinfree Makoni et al, *Black Linguistics: Language, Society and Politics in Africa and the Americas* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 132-151.
[7] Sanders, pp. 113-4.

Yet the book also seems to reveals something important about intellectual work in a more general sense, by laying painfully bare the interplay of the psychic, historical, and political that serve as its sometime foundations: the little boy standing in the wings of the theatre with his cardboard assegai, is also standing in the wings of the scholarship of the Professor of Comparative Literature at NYU, Mark Sanders. To read *Learning Zulu* is to have to confront that within academic work which returns us to our formative scenes, psychically vested in "guilt" and "reparation", even – or perhaps especially – when we might be seeking it out as a means of escape. It reinstitutes and insists upon the connections between the autobiographical, emotional, and academic.[8] At the same time, in doing so, it locates the white boy learner as the centre of this "secret history of language" – which is, in that sense, not so secret, insofar as it has always been the little white boy who has been the exemplar of the apt pupil in the centre of this scene. As, indeed, he has always been at the centre of the psychoanalytic, as well as the linguistic, scene of teaching.

Crucially, *Learning Zulu* confesses as much, even as it enacts it: tracing the histories by which the white boy has always been at the centre of the story, and by which it continues to be he who tells it; yet in telling it, Sanders suggests, can try to tell it differently. Thus, this is a book whose narrative logic works towards what Sanders casts as its endgame, and what becomes for me as reader its crucial ethical gesture: for the "small boy" to "loosen his investment in the name [Zulu] as he bears witness to a history of language that no longer has him at its center." (73). Though there is some sense throughout the book of this as one "secret history" among many, Sanders saves for the final, concluding chapter his own displacement as its agent. Finally, in the South Africa of 2008, it is not the little white boy who is the protagonist of this "secret history" any longer, but those migrant workers for whom a particular, ethnocentric vision of the object "Zulu" is being mobilized to stand for exclusion, violence, and destitution. This seems to me to be the most suggestive move among the many made by *Learning Zulu*, as it gestures to a far wider understanding of South Africa's past and present through scenes of learning language than is possible while the "small boy" remains at its centre: scenes of language learning that are urban or rural, consensual or coercive, in classrooms and streets and mines and homes, from missionaries

[8] Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006).

in the nineteenth-century Eastern Cape to children in Soweto in 1976 to Zimbabwean migrants in contemporary Johannesburg. As this suggests, this is a "secret history" that will tell of the very real *dangers* of learning/ not learning language in South Africa. But it may also help to construct a vision of learning as a model for a politics of inclusion in South Africa, as Sanders most suggestively offers:

> Could a generalized idea of learning, likewise, be a condition of possibility for a different hospitality? Never quite having arrived, always under-way – is that not what learning is?[9]

References

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[9] Sanders, p. 12.

Sinfree Makoni and Alastair Pennycook, “Disinventing and Reconstituting Languages”, in Sinfree Makoni and Alastair Pennycook, *Disinventing and Reconstituting Languages* (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 2007), pp. 1-41.